

# Smoke Trap Boomerang

By William Steis



**With a full-grown man lying dead on Hiram Cotter's miniature railroad tracks, the old criminologist found himself meshed in a miniature network of murderous proportions.**

**T**HE letter smelled faintly of cheap perfume. Printed in block letters, it said, *Today has Thor chosen for you to die for the execution of Limpy Malone.* There was no signature, no date.

Hiram Cotter, who had built a reputation, a fortune, and a hundred-room mansion catching crooks, grunted sourly and thrust the letter into his pocket. He, one of the world's greatest criminologists, had received lots like it. They all went into the file marked, *Nuts.*

Hiram had retired a few years ago when his rheumatic legs forced him into a wheel chair. He indulged in his one remaining passion, his hobby—miniature electric trains.

Gleaming yellow, red, blue, and chrome streamliners; fat, black-bellied engines of today and yesterday, chugged, sped, or clanked over the maze of bright nickel tracks which spread over the entire floor of Hiram's huge, baroque ballroom. A room originally

intended for the dancing feet of over two hundred couples.

Except for an aisle near the windows wide enough to allow his wheel chair to pass to the door at the opposite end of the room, this room was a continent in miniature. Lilliputian towns, tiny terminals, crossing gates, sidings, roundhouses, machine shops, tunnels, bridges, signal towers, and block signals were all a part of Hiram Cotter's world-renowned miniature railway system.

The room was divided into three divisions. Over them ran small counterparts of famous trains: the *Chief*, the *400*, the *Century*, and old *999*.

Everything in this small world was controlled by Hiram from a board full of switches, buttons, red and green lights. Even coupling and uncoupling the trains was controlled from the board. Every thing was automatic.

Hiram and the board sat on a raised band platform at one end of the room. To his left were the windows. Behind him a door led to a back hallway and a back stairs.

This was an unusual day in Hiram's world of trains. He had received a threatening letter, and he was entertaining week-end guests, Gregory and Leila Martin.

"What a system," said Gregory in a tight voice. "How do you manage to keep so many trains running at one time?"

Gregory Martin was short and at that time of life when youthful muscles were relaxing into fatty tissue. Thinning black hair gave his forehead an extremely wide appearance. His greenish eyes, darting here and there nervously, were small. He was smartly dressed and a woody after-shave lotion clung to him. He nervously rubbed his hands together when he talked.

"Get on the platform, you two, and I'll show you how I work it. I adhere to a strict schedule. For instance, it's time for that freight there to leave the terminal at this end. It's five minutes behind the *Century* and will stay that way all the way around."

A small, heavily loaded freight chugged slowly from the station.

"Is that the one that smokes?" Gregory asked, his hand fluttering to his coat lapel and sliding up and down it. "I'm especially interested in that one."

"No," answered Hiram, his eyes glued to clearing the track in the terminal for the *Chief*, "it's sidetracked, waiting orders. It's down near the door on the track next to the aisle."

"Gregory has an engine just like it," said Leila softly, "but yours is much better, I imagine. His smokes all over the engine."

Her reddish hair, piled on top of her head, made her seem tall. She was more slender than her brother. Her wide eyes were blue, her mouth heavy, her small chin sharply cut and determined. She was poised and relaxed. A heavy perfume tickled Hiram's nose when she moved near.

"This is what I use in my engine," said Gregory, pulling from his pocket a small metallic cartridge much like the charges used in home siphon bottles.

"Use the same thing," grunted Hiram, deftly pulling the *Chief* in on time. "Must be the mechanism in your engine. Had the same trouble. Doped out a little gadget that fixed it. You put your cartridge in my engine. We'll soon see if it's the cartridge you use or the mechanism of your engine."

"Right," said Gregory. "Maybe you and I can make a trade. Your gadget for my—"

"Gregory!" snapped Leila, her eyes a tigerish glare, her small hand suddenly grasping his arm.

He jerked his arm away, glared at her, and shook his head.

A DISCREET cough behind them, and a man stepped from the door onto the platform. "Pompino let me in this way," said John Owens. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Cotter."

Hiram grunted, but he had to turn away from the extended hand. He saw trouble on the main line. The next few minutes were spent in avoiding a collision between a fast freight and a milk train. Hiram finally got the latter to a siding just ahead of the freight.

Hiram swung back and shook hands with Owens who was his new neighbor. Owens had pestered him so much to see the trains that Hiram had consented in desperation.

Hiram noticed both the man's hands were yellowish as from jaundice. His face was sallow. A bitter odor clung to him. His dark eyes were hard. Tall, thin with graying hair, he stood in a loose-jointed manner, one hand in his pocket.

Hiram found the Martins and Owens had introduced themselves.

"They came all the way from Canada, Owens, to demonstrate a new automatic speed control he's invented. I was just showing them my smoking engine."

"Pompino told me about that," said

Owens. "I was hoping I'd see it."

Gregory Martin walked down the aisle. His sister followed.

"Dammit," growled Hiram almost upsetting a fast passenger as he skidded it into a siding to let a streamliner through, "time for the *Rocket* to leave."

People were a nuisance. His hands whirled across his board like a supreme artist's at the piano. Yet another part of his mind concentrated on the words barely discernible from the other end of the room.

"Greg," said Leila, "you'll be sorry if you give that invention away. You've got to sell it."

"Shut up," he answered vehemently, his eyes glowering, his forehead a black frown, "I know what I'm doing."

Leila looked, turned, and flipped from the room, while Gregory nervously inserted the cartridge in the engine.

Hiram started the engine moving. Then he threw another switch. A puff of black smoke, another, and the engine was streaming black smoke behind it just like its huge brother freights did.

"Wonderful," said Owens, smacking his closed fist into the palm of his open hand. "I've never seen anything more realistic."

"Amazing," exclaimed Gregory, a hand twittering nervously across his weak chin. .

"After I see your invention work," grunted Hiram, "maybe we can make a trade in spite of your sister. Better come back this afternoon, Owens, and watch the demonstration."

"I'll do that," said Owens, sauntering lazily toward the door. "See you this afternoon." He disappeared as Pompino announced lunch.

Hiram stopped his trains where they were. Motioning Gregory to the dining room, Hiram rolled down a small incline from the platform and along the aisle. He closed and locked the French windows as he passed. The latch was

constructed so that he could reach it from his chair.

In the hall he did not bother to lock the door. He merely inserted a small key into a lock on the wall. With a twist his alarm system was turned on. He had neither insurance nor protection for the fabulous paintings in the house. His trains he protected with the most modern of burglar alarm systems.

**F**OLLOWING Hiram's after-lunch nap, Pompino pushed him along the elaborate hall toward the ballroom. There was a heaviness in the air, a sultry undertone foreboding evil. Hiram laid it to the dreariness of the sudden afternoon thundershower which had sprung up. The rain washed angrily against the hall windows.

"Where are the Martins?"

Pompino shrugged. "I do not know. It is I think they do not like one another. It is perhaps they are not even brother and sister."

"You fool," grunted Hiram. "Have they been quarreling while I slept?"

"I took the long walk while you rested."

"In the rain?" queried Hiram sharply. "Bah, you were courting that maid down the block again." Pompino remained silent and smiling while Hiram unlocked the alarm system and pushed open the door to the ballroom.

Gregory Martin, eyes distorted and glassy, mouth stiff and awry, stared up at Hiram from the floor. He lay on his back across the tracks near the aisle. The freight train standing just in front of him gave a melodramatic tableau effect. It seemed as if the train were about to run him down.

"Open those windows!" shouted Hiram, sniffing the air.

"*Madre de Dios*, what is this?"

"It's Martin. He's dead!"

"That I see, but how?"

"Get those windows open!" shouted Hiram, again sniffing a faint odor of almonds.

“But the rain—”

“Damn the rain,” snapped Hiram. “After that, carry him into the library. And don’t call the police!”

Hiram squeezed past the man’s extended feet and hurried down the aisle.

As he rolled up the incline, onto the platform, Leila Martin’s heels clacked rapidly behind him. Her eyes, as she stood in front of the control panel, were little, hard stones of blue.

“You killed him,” she gasped, pounding white fists against the top of the control board, “to get his invention!”

Hiram’s black, sparkling eyes snapped at her. “How did you know he was killed?”

“I—I,” she stammered. “How else could he have died?”

“He was killed all right. Where were you when he died?”

“Oh!” cried Leila, her hand crushing against her pale lips. “You beast! You killed him. You’ll pay for it.” She turned and ran down the aisle, her skirts swirling around her knees. Pompino struggled through the door with the body. Leila turned her head as she brushed past them.

**H**IRAM, finding his tracks undamaged, uncoupled the freight engine, ran it to a roundhouse, and coupled an exact duplicate to the freight train.

He stared across the room, unmindful of the gusts of spray blowing through the open window. Hiram reconstructed the murder in his mind.

The instrument of death had been cyanide gas. The odor of almonds in the room proved that. With the windows tightly shut, one whiff was sufficient to cause death. The killer, noting the weatherman’s forecast of rain, had banked on the windows being shut. That explained the reference in the note to Thor, the god of thunder.

Was the murder intended for Hiram or Martin? The note might have been a diversion to throw Hiram off the trail.

Hiram reasoned that a cartridge filled with cyanide gas had been inserted into his engine. Martin, intent on stealing the idea of the mechanism in the engine, had tripped the lever releasing the gas. One whiff. Poof, he was dead. In a room even this large it would not take much to kill a dozen people.

But how had Martin and the murderer gotten through the door? Hiram rejected the idea of suicide. Gregory was not the type.

Leila had said her brother’s engine leaked smoke. She might have planned the murder for a long time. She had access to the smoke cartridges and could have had one filled with cyanide. Finding Hiram’s engine in perfect working order would be just the right opportunity. Then the letter would have been written to throw suspicion off herself. It would have gotten that faint perfume odor from being carried in her pocketbook.

If the letter came from Owens, whose avid interest in the trains made him suspicious to Hiram, then it was a theatrical gesture to let Hiram know why he was being killed. If it were Owens, then Hiram was the intended victim. But how had he gotten into the room? Always Hiram came back to that puzzling question. There it seemed was the key.

The rain stopped as quickly as it had started. Hiram did three things in rapid succession.

First, he rolled into the hall and called the company which made his smoke cartridges, then he called a disinfectant company.

Secondly, he carefully inspected the alarm system. It was in perfect order.

Thirdly, he went into the garden and sat for almost an hour watching a bird fly from a tree to strands of wire on the far side of the garden wall and back again. Hiram always marveled how birds could balance themselves on electric light wires the way they did.

As he left the garden with an idea

formulated in the back of his mind, Pompino handed him a small package. Hiram motioned Pompino into the ballroom, and had him insert the contents of the package, a smoke cartridge, in the freight engine.

Hiram called Lieutenant Brink, Homicide Squad, gave him Leila's description and added, "Bring her here. I've something interesting for you."

Hiram hung up and stared into John Owens' dark eyes. Hiram grunted. He was annoyed. This sudden appearance of Owens might well disturb the careful timing of Hiram's trap. He wheeled into the ballroom and onto the platform. Owens frowned.

"I understand," said Owens, "there's been an accident. How'd it happen?"

"No accident," said Hiram, looking keenly at Owens. "A well-planned murder. Very clever, Owens. It almost worked."

"Damn you!" shouted Owens, springing forward. "It'll work this time."

**A**FTER gagging Hiram and tying his hands behind the wheel chair, Owens yanked out a wire from the control panel, ran it from where the 120-volt house current entered the transformer. He ran the wire under the tracks and bent the ends in such a manner that they did not quite touch a switch connection. From the control panel he yanked the end of the wire that ran from it to the electric switch. This end he wired to Hiram's hands and the chair.

"All I do now is start a train," leered Owens. "The pressure as it passes that siding switch will connect those wires. You're old, and not very strong. It won't take much to kill you. Not as much as it took to execute my brother, Limpy Malone. Meantime I'll be far away establishing a foolproof alibi."

After starting the train, Owens started down the aisle toward the door.

Hiram struggled frantically. He had but seconds and one desperate chance. As Owens and the train came almost abreast, Hiram

made a desperate plunge, clicking the switch he aimed at with his chin, and fell face forward onto the floor of the platform.

A nimbus of smoke poured from the engine. Owens stopped. Stared. He choked as more smoke poured out. His eyes watered. His face went white. He trembled. He choked more. Coughed. Frantically he kicked the engine from the track, but not before he was enveloped in smoke. Then he screamed. Loudly, piercingly, he screamed.

Pompino pounded through the door, crashing into Owens. Lieutenant Brink and Leila were hard on his heels.

"Close call," muttered Brink, as he untied Hiram. "That guy try to electrocute you?"

"Yeah. He killed the girl's brother. Presume she told you the story?"

"Uh-huh," nodded Brink. "How'd you figure him out?"

"At first couldn't understand how they both got through my alarm system. Then a bird sitting on those electric wires out there gave me the answer. Owens cut the wires outside the house, sneaked in, placed the cartridge. He thought I'd be running my trains during the storm and have the windows closed. While he slipped out one door, Martin came in the other. Owens spliced the wires outside again. Martin, meantime, set off the smoke and died."

"But," said Leila, hurrying up, "I thought you suspected me."

"Did at first. The perfume on this letter," he tossed it to Brink, "pointed to you, but then it didn't match up with the perfume you were wearing. I remembered Owens had a bitter odor on him. He was saturated in sweet perfume. It was overpoweringly sweet. Hence, bitter. His yellow hands tipped me off he was a chemist and would know about cyanide. Sure enough a call to a disinfectant company confirmed that he worked there making those perfumed blocks used in washrooms to kill offensive odors. I planned to make him confess by getting him in here with us. I was

going to make the engine smoke. He, knowing he had put cyanide gas in it, would react. He upset the apple cart by arriving too soon. I accused him. He jumped me. Luckily I got to that smoke button. He screamed when he thought he was being gassed.”

Hiram beamed proudly at his own ingenuity.

Brink shook his head and muttered, “You might have killed him with that stuff.”

“Nonsense,” said Hiram, inspecting his board. The missing wires could easily be replaced. The board still worked. He pressed a button. A train whistled to clear the track. Hiram smiled.

“Instead of cyanide, Brink, he was breathing psychology and tear gas. You see,” continued Hiram, starting the drive wheels of a passenger train spinning, “I replaced the cyanide cartridge with one filled with tear gas!”